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RECREATION MANAGEMENT PLAN
FOR THE CONEJOS RIVER DRAINAGE

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Clemson Class of 1991

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ABSTRACT

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TITLE: Recreation Management Plan For The Conejos River Drainage

ABSTRACT: The majority of recreation opportunities on the Conejos Peak Ranger District are found within the Conejos River drainage, including seven of eight fee areas.

Several projects in recreation, timber, range, wildlife, and roads are planned for the near future in this area. A recreation management plan is a useful and necessary tool to help coordinate these activities. An interdisciplinary team was assembled to contribute to the drafting of a recreation management plan.

Rehabilitation of six of the fee areas is scheduled for 1994. Accessible facilities are an important part of the rehabilitation project.

The objective of this paper is to provide guidance to Ranger District personnel and help coordinate these activities, which will improve the recreational experience enjoyed by our visiting public.

This paper will also be utilized and considered in the next revision of the Rio Grande National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan.

KEYWORDS: River Recreation, Interdisciplinary Team, Accessibility, Recreation Management Plan

Conejos River Drainage Vicinity Map

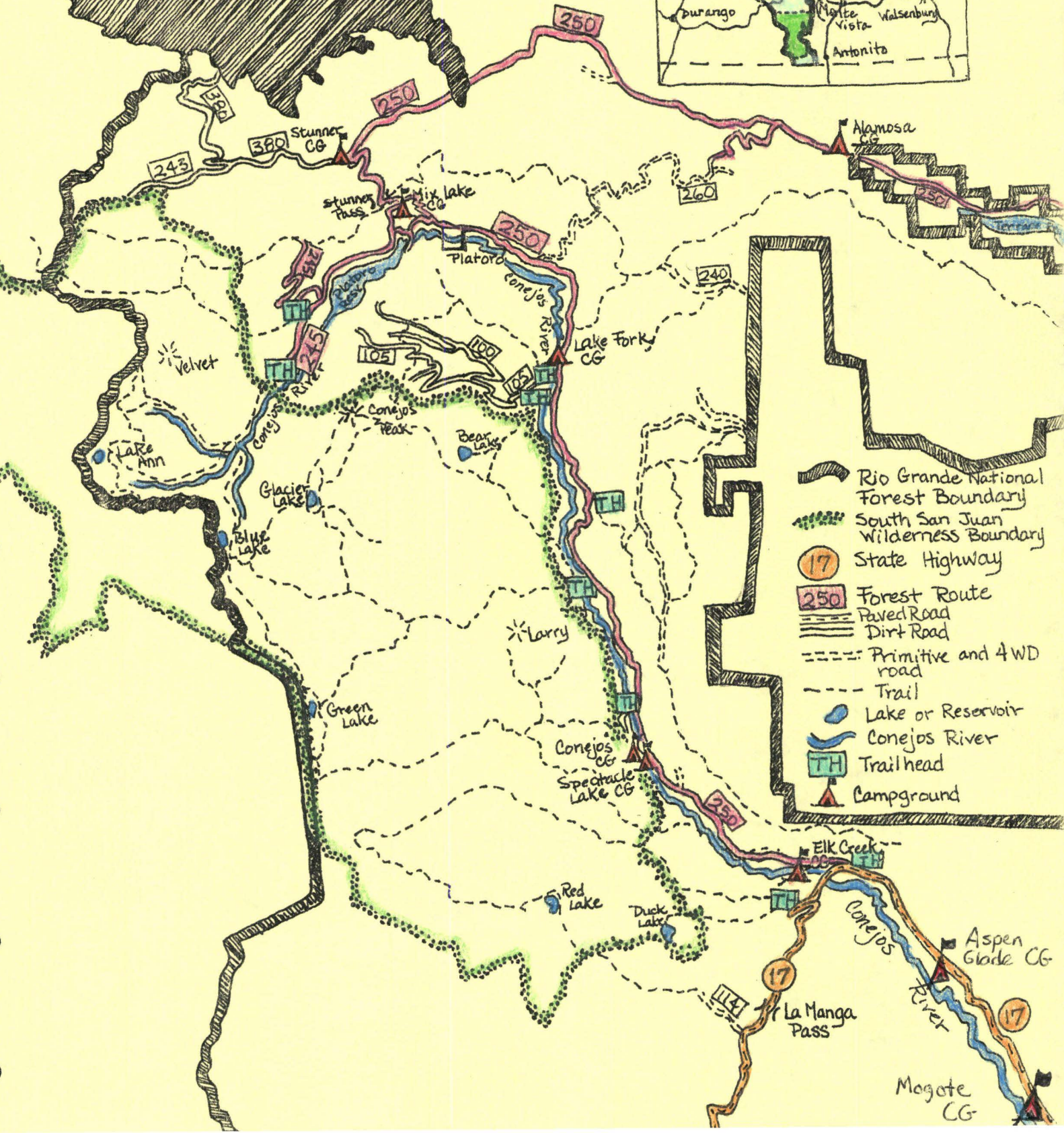


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The majority of developed recreation opportunities on the Conejos Peak Ranger District can be found within the Conejos River drainage. Seven of eight District fee campgrounds are found here.

A Capital Investment Program project will affect six of these developed campgrounds in 1994-5. Rehabilitation and handicapped accessibility of the sites is the main focus of this construction activity.

In addition, the main thoroughfare in the drainage, FDR 250, is scheduled for "safety improvement" of a small section in 1994. A nearby timber sale will utilize FDR 250 as the main haul route, also in 1994.

An interdisciplinary team was formed to help coordinate these activities and identify other projects currently planned for the area. The interdisciplinary team also made recommendations to improve the recreation experiences for our customers.

The purpose and objective of this paper is to bring together the ideas and issues identified by the interdisciplinary team, and to help coordinate the activities taking place in the Conejos River drainage. This paper will also be utilized and considered in the next revision of the Rio Grande National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan.

Many action items were identified and several alternatives were presented and considered. The preferred alternative was selected which was deemed the alternative which best serves our customers, the recreating public.

Implementation of the preferred alternative will require writing and submitting several proposals for funding consideration. The implementation is expected to be spread out over a three to five year period.

INTRODUCTION

The Forest Service Manual, Title 2300-Recreation Management,¹ states that recreation is the activity that brings most citizens into direct contact with the Forest Service. The manual also states, Forest Recreation experiences, which provide enjoyable outlets for America's leisure time, can range from wilderness solitude to gathering firewood to alpine skiing. They can enhance physical and mental health, knowledge, social relation, and productivity. This contributes directly to the health and welfare of the nation. It will take the combined resources of federal, State, and private lands to meet the expected recreation demands of the future. The National Forest System will meet its share.

The authority for development of recreation sites is the Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act of 1960. The authority to regulate use in recreation sites comes from the Organic Act of 1897 which allows the Secretary of Agriculture to make rules and regulations as necessary to regulate occupancy and use of the National Forests. These are contained in Title 36 of the Code of Federal Regulations, Section 261.

The objective of this plan is to provide guidance to Ranger District personnel by creating a recreation management plan for the Conejos River Drainage. The plan will encompass approximately 40 miles of the drainage, beginning at the Forest boundary and ending at the wilderness interface near Three Forks Trailhead (map attached). Increased usage and impacts on the resource, and the plan to upgrade facilities, make a recreation management plan for the area a very useful and necessary tool. The plan will assist in the planning for future recreation opportunities in the Conejos River drainage and will be completed using an interdisciplinary team (ID team) approach.

A long term recreation management plan needs to be completed with input from all disciplines. An integrated resource management plan will insure that consideration will be given to all resources. Recreation on all National Forests is becoming more important as a heightened environmental awareness and increased demand is occurring.

It is quickly apparent from contacts with visitors that a wide variety of people are using the Conejos River drainage for many different reasons. However, the two largest user groups are anglers and sightseers. The Conejos River is a very popular fishery and draws the majority of visitors to the area. There are ten developed United States Forest Service (USFS) campgrounds or camp areas within the drainage, seven fee, and three non-fee. Three of the fee campgrounds are accessed via a paved state highway, and the remaining areas are accessed via a gravel Forest Development Road (FDR). The major issues and concerns which may affect this plan are the possibility of improving this FDR and a gambling proposal in the local area which would increase visitation to the area.

ISSUES, CONCERNS, AND OPPORTUNITIES

FEDERAL HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATION

The Federal Highway Administration made a proposal to improve Forest Development Road 250 (FDR 250). FDR 250 is currently a gravel road which gets very rough after nominal use. The road is maintained by Conejos County with funding cost shared by USFS. Maintenance occurs four times yearly, all during the busy use periods from May to October. A mine in Platoro sometimes keeps the road open in winter through a permit with the USFS. If not, a locked gate stops vehicles approximately 10 miles up FDR 250, past the last private dwellings. The road is used by snowmobilers during winters when not plowed.

The poor road condition has had major impacts to repeat visitation, especially campers with expensive recreational vehicles. The newer, more expensive RV's aren't seen nearly as often as in most other areas. According to recreation staff in the field and front-desk receptionists at the Ranger District office, the road condition is one of the most frequent topics of conversation when visiting with the public.

The proposal to improve FDR 250 is controversial. Many of the current users realize that improving the road will result in increased use, and in their eyes, more competition and less elbow-room. Many of our traditional users become very protective of "their" campground and view critically any change they see. These people want things to stay unchanged forever. Comments to Compliance Officers, campground hosts, and on fee envelopes support this conclusion. "More experienced users "see" and are more sensitive to current levels of resource damage.² It is suggested that the greater experience of these users enhances a level of perceptual sensitivity and specificity which may present an attunement to differing attributes within the recreational environment.³ Contrarily, private landowners in the canyon have banded together and support any improvement to FDR 250.

The road improvement proposal would effect FDR 250 from it's junction with State Highway 17 to Platoro, a distance of approximately 26 miles. The current schedule has this improvement to begin in 1998. A "safety improvement" of 2 miles of the road is scheduled for 1994. The 1998 date will require Conejos County to purchase right-of-way from private landowners along the existing road prior to any construction activity. The right-of-way purchase is considered unlikely which may result in delays or cancellation of the project.

GAMBLING

A recent hot issue in the local area has been legalized gambling. Gambling has recently been legalized in several other counties in Colorado which met low income criteria. Conejos County is one of the poorest County's in the state and nation. Many people want to legalize gambling to help improve the economy.

A local committee is trying to get enough momentum together to get the gambling issue on a state-wide referendum on the November 1992 ballot.

Impacts to the Conejos drainage are expected if gambling is legalized. Acquisition of private land in the drainage would be less likely due to rising land values, perceived or otherwise. Increased visitation is expected due to the areas proximity to New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma.

The small town of Antonito is the expected location of the gambling and is the closest town to the area, only 13 miles from Mogote campground.

The Federal Highway Administration project may be hastened if gambling is approved and visitation increases enough that political pressure results in making the road improvement a higher priority.

Either the road improvement or the gambling issue may create scenarios not anticipated by either this plan, current management, or Forest Plan direction. This recreation management plan will need to be re-visited if either the entire road improvement or gambling issues come to fruition.

ACCESSIBILITY

An accessible facility must offer the person with a disability an opportunity to achieve experiences similar to those offered other recreationists. Full accessibility is the goal but may not be desirable if site modification will cause unacceptable resource impacts¹.

All developed sites will meet current accessible standards following rehabilitation of existing developed campgrounds in 1994-95.

With the exception of Mogote campground, all fee campgrounds within the drainage are scheduled for the Capital Investment Program (CIP) rehabilitation in either 1994 or 1995. Submittals for rehabilitation of the campgrounds were done separately to spread out the construction projects and allow flexibility during the contracts. The proposals were placed together by the Regional Office and we will have to write the contracts so that impacts to our visitors are lessened. The contractor should be required to complete work in a campground before they can begin in another. Notices were placed in the campgrounds starting in 1991 to make campers aware of possible construction activity. Campers were instructed to call or write ahead to find out the construction status in their campground.

Accessibility was not addressed adequately in the original CIP proposals. The accessibility issue was addressed in a subsequent proposal and recently added to the original project in the fall of 1991.

Accessibility is a major reason for the rehabilitation of the campgrounds. All new or renovated structures will meet or exceed minimum standards for accessibility. These criteria are found in Forest Service Handbook 2309, FSH 7309, Facility and Design Handbook, and Forest Service Manual 7400.⁴

An accessibility study⁵ was contracted in the fall of 1991. The purpose of the study was to provide an assessment of current and future outdoor recreation opportunities on existing developed facilities for physically and developmentally challenged individuals.

The assessment was done by a team of four people; one visually impaired, one hearing impaired, one mobility impaired, and one able-bodied. The team made the following observations.

1. Current statistics indicate that almost sixty percent of the population benefits from accessible facilities.
2. The top priority to broaden the recreational experience opportunities in this area is trail work. The next priority would be the development of specific access for fishing, followed by development of playground and game areas.
3. All developed campgrounds have the potential (based on elevation, occupancy, location to highway, cost effectiveness, and level sites) to be developed for use by physically and developmentally disabled individuals. All need upgrading in the areas of tables, fire rings, sign-age, curbing, toilets, and water facilities.

The team also made the following general recommendations.

1. Leave the terrain natural.

2. Use extended end picnic tables.
3. Use raised fire grills.
4. Increase use of signs, especially tactile signs.
5. Install curbing for the blind.
6. Make toilets and drinking water accessible.

The team makes an interesting point. Their top three priorities were for accessible avenues to recreation after they reached the campground. Government priorities have always been accessible facilities. Once physically and developmentally challenged individuals are in the campgrounds, it is important to provide recreation opportunities, not just the camping experience. Trail work to provide barrier-free access to the Conejos River can be accomplished cost effectively since all campgrounds are located "on" the river. Although much more expensive, accessible fishing piers are recommended at several locations outside developed areas along the Conejos River drainage.

ACQUISITION

Private land inholdings and their development are a major concern on this Ranger District, especially in the Conejos River drainage. Several subdivisions of vacation homes currently exist, with the most recent being developed within the last year. The potential for additional development exists in some very prime locations. Acquisition of some of these tracts is a high District priority.

These subdivisions detract from the aesthetic values and visual quality objectives for the drainage. Acquisition is important to allow more control over the recreation opportunities and to preserve the scenic values of the drainage. This plan endorses the acquisition of as much of this resource as possible, with priority emphasis on the parcels on FDR 250 in the Spectacle Lake and South Fork Trailhead areas.

The Rio Grande National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan⁶ identifies the land parcels and their classification status. Many of the parcels originally classified as "prosposed for purchase" were changed to "no buy area" because of development or being in a developed area. Several more parcels were entered into the "no buy area" classification due to recent developments. Total acreage classified as "proposed for purchase" is currently 3,023 acres on seven parcels.

RANGE MANAGEMENT

There are five range allotments within the Conejos River drainage. The range allotments are all for cattle and horses. In addition, sheep allotments further up the drainage use part of the drainage as a stock driveway, in the Platoro area. A total of 1,500 cow/calf pairs are allowed in these 5 allotments.

Considerable effort has been expended by District staff to manage these range allotments. Permanent reductions in numbers of cow/calf pairs have been instituted on one allotment in the last year, with additional reductions probable on the remaining Conejos Canyon allotments within the next four years. Changes in livestock management are also being implemented to improve livestock distribution, utilization, and to alleviate conflicts with summer home owners and recreationists within these allotments.

Range management practices on National Forests are often controversial. Many of the campground visitors find the western flavor of cattle drives and seeing other activities associated with ranching as an integral part of their recreation experience. Many other visitors view the cattle as a nuisance and don't feel cattle should be permitted. Complaints are often voiced through letters to the District office of permitted cattle on or adjacent to private inholdings.

Cattle exclosures are prevalent around most of the campgrounds in the Conejos River drainage. The cattle still find their way into campgrounds on a fairly regular basis, causing conflicts with campers. The exclosure fences constructed around the campgrounds are old, having been built when the campgrounds were first opened. The fences are wooden pole fences built from trees which were close to the site. The posts and rails were stained soon after construction, trapping moisture within the wood, which caused premature decay. This decay is causing a number of rails to break every year. Spans up to 18 feet between posts creating too much weight have also hastened this process.

New exclosure fences are needed around all campgrounds in the drainage. The estimated cost of this replacement is over \$180,000.⁷ Lodgepole pine is recommended for the rails, and posts should be placed no more than 12 feet apart. The new fence should not be stained for at least one year after construction to allow the wood to air dry and lengthen its life expectancy. Stiles or other cattle proof passageways should be considered for places where campers have been crossing the fence. A CIP proposal should be drafted for the exclosure fences.

Cattle on the National Forest is a valid use of the resource. The local ranching industry is reliant upon the forage provided by the National Forest during the summer months. The multiple use philosophy of the National Forest System bears this out. Many visitors simply do not understand this concept and interpretive signing may be a way to reach these people.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

The ID team identified a set of preliminary criteria to be used in arriving at the best alternative. The alternative selected for implementation should:

Be consistent with the management objectives for the area as stated in the Forest Plan

Be cost effective

Be feasible considering laws, regulations, and public acceptance

Promote the safety of all users of public lands

INFORMATION, DATA, INVENTORIES, AND STUDIES

LAND AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN

The Rio Grande National Forest's Land and Resource Management Plan⁸ was reviewed for guidance and consistency with this recreation plan. The Forest Plan states that recreation is one of the major uses on the forest. An estimated 1.74 million recreation visitor days occurred in 1981, which included 500,000 at developed sites. Historically, the Conejos Peak Ranger District has led the forest in developed site visitation and receipts. The Conejos River drainage includes seven of the eight fee

campgrounds on the district, making this drainage the leader in developed recreation for the Rio Grande National Forest.

General direction from the Forest Plan applicable to the drainage states that the USFS will provide facilities which are accessible to handicapped persons; that we will design, construct, and operate developed sites which are adjacent to or provide an access point into a wilderness to compliment wilderness management objectives; and to construct, reconstruct, and maintain developed sites in accordance with the established Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) classification for the management area.

The drainage falls under ROS classes urban, rural, or roaded natural. The urban classifications occur in the small mining community of Platoro and several private subdivisions where many summer homes are grouped together. The rural classifications consist of private land parcels with single or few dwellings and USFS developed campgrounds. The remainder, and majority, of the land falls under the roaded natural classification.

In addition to the ROS classes outlined above, the Forest Plan outlines management on the entire Forest through "management area directions". A map attached to the Forest Plan delineates the management area directions. The area covered by this plan falls under three different management area directions.

The upper portion (approximately 60%) of the area is under management area 10D, which "provides for management and protection of the Conejos Wild and Scenic River proposal".

The middle portion (approximately 25%) falls under management area 2B which "emphasizes rural and roaded natural recreation opportunities such as driving for pleasure and viewing for scenery, and snowmobiling". Management activities may remain visually subordinate or dominant. Timber harvest will enhance visual quality, recreation setting, and wildlife habitat diversity.

The lower 15% of the drainage falls under management area 5B which "emphasizes the management of elk and deer winter range in forested areas."

WILDLIFE

Wildlife viewing and hunting are responsible for bringing many people into the Conejos River drainage. Keeping the habitat in its existing condition is the limiting factor to future wildlife populations. The private land found within the drainage could have negative impacts to wildlife populations if increased development removes essential habitat from the existing base. The USFS land should continue to provide a stable habitat base for wildlife, and this plan will encourage acquisition of private lands to increase this land base.

Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive (TES) species are important considerations in this plan. TES species known in the drainage include the American peregrine falcon⁸, Rio Grande cutthroat trout, and Ripley's milkvetch, an endangered plant. Preliminary work indicates that the Leopard Frog and Boreal Toad may also be present.

Bighorn Sheep, although not a TES species, exist within the drainage and are, at certain times of the year, readily visible.

Prior to any construction or similar work activity, a survey should be done to assess impacts to TES species. This survey could be done in conjunction with a cultural resources survey. Intensive monitoring of the falcons is currently being accomplished by the Colorado Division of Wildlife.

The Rio Grande cutthroat trout are located in a creek that feeds into the Conejos River and are outside the plan, however, management actions within the plan area may impact this species. An assessment will be done prior to any activities which may affect the cutthroats.

Recreational fishing draws the majority of the visitation to the Conejos River drainage. The Colorado Division of Wildlife stocks the Conejos River on a weekly basis during the summer. Our developed campgrounds provide close access to the river and are used as stocking locations. Continuation of this practice is encouraged as the arrival of the fish truck is an anticipated event each week by many campers, especially those with young children.

Accessible fishing structures or piers are needed according to the accessibility survey⁵ completed in 1991. According to the study, accessible camping facilities are provided, but too often the handicapped individual is left with nothing to do in the campground. Accessible trails and fishing access were recommended. Fishing piers with rip-rap to stabilize the stream in that location are needed. A Capital Investment Program proposal should be developed.

Also, wildlife managers propose to place large rocks and/or trees in the Conejos River in strategic locations to create favorable fish habitat. These structures would create hiding, feeding, and nesting cover for the fish and create more diversity in the stream.

DEMAND

A lack of data on the visitors using the drainage exists. Work this summer by employees and campground hosts will help us to identify our users in developed sites. We appear to have a unique user group, different from most USFS sites. "Customer"⁹ research from 8 recreation sites nation-wide indicates a predominantly white, middle-aged male user group. Hispanics make up a larger percentage of our users mirroring the local population. These locals tend to utilize the closer lower campgrounds the most. Data gathered by the nearby Sand Dunes National Monument from 1991¹⁰ found that 47% of their visitors were from Colorado, 11% from Texas, and 4% from Missouri. Numbers of Coloradans seem to be much lower in our campgrounds.

Ages of our users tend to be older than the "Customer" research. Over 30% of our paying customers to campgrounds last year utilized golden age passports. Texans and Oklahomans are prevalent throughout all campgrounds and are considered the largest group using our developed sites. Escaping the heat back home is a big reason many of these people come. Our length of stay is much higher than the research, with most people staying two to three weeks. We have at least ten different parties who stay most of the summer. Our use season is relatively short. Due to snow, Memorial Day weekend finds most campgrounds fairly quiet. Our busiest month is July, with August being a close second. The last week of June finds campgrounds getting busy and staying busy until the middle of August. Labor Day weekend is usually another quiet holiday period, with colder nights keeping visitors away.

Variable pricing will be instituted beginning with the 1992 season to spread use over all sites within the campgrounds. The variable pricing is intended to minimize impacts to some of the "choice" sites and increase use in other parts of the campground. Length of stay of 14 days will be enforced in the most popular areas, with no limits in the rest of the areas. Length of stay in the lesser used sites was changed to unlimited to accommodate the many campers who come for extended stays.

Many of the popular sites are being placed under the Mistix reservation system for the first time in 1992. This, along with enforcing the 14 day limit will make these sites available to all campers. The Mistix reservation system is a nation-wide system contracted by the USFS which utilizes a toll-free number (1-800-283-CAMP) to make a reservation at campgrounds all around the nation. Four of the seven campgrounds in the Conejos River drainage have reservable sites through Mistix.

The road condition of FDR 250 serves as a natural barrier to increased visitation and is currently the limiting factor to increased visitation in the upper part of the drainage. We expect visitation to the upper drainage to increase fairly dramatically if improvements to the entire length of the road occur.

DEVELOPED AREAS

Currently, the existing developed areas seem to adequately serve our public in respect to capacity. Rehabilitation and retrofitting for accessibility are needed and scheduled to begin in 1994.

All developed campgrounds are similar in design and function. All have vault toilets and when replaced with accessible structures will remain vault toilets. Sweet Smelling Toilets (SST)¹¹ is a new technology developed by USFS researchers and will be applied in the design and construction of these new toilet structures. This Ranger District believes strongly that clean, odor free toilet facilities are very important to our visitors recreation experiences. Clean, odor-free toilets equal happy campers.

Water systems are either pressurized or hand pumps. Three campgrounds have pressurized systems with one more scheduled to be converted to pressurized with the upcoming rehabilitation. The pressurized systems are subject to freezing and result in a shorter operational season than the hand pumps. Frost free systems are available and should be considered. USFS direction requires that fee systems must have water available. The frost free systems would effectively lengthen the season and also better serve our customers.

Our informal surveys have shown that many people still prefer the hand pumps while camping. Hand pumps rarely exist anymore and many people like the experience. Many of our campers utilized hand pumps as a child and find the nostalgic value very satisfying. Hand pumps will remain in several campgrounds and remain an option for those who prefer that experience.

All water systems are tested monthly for health requirements. A contract is used for the testing and should continue to be utilized as it is a cost effective method.

Each camp unit within the developed campgrounds consists of a level spur for parking, a picnic table, fire grill, and a garbage can. Barriers to prevent vehicles from driving off spurs and roads are placed where needed and consist of either large rocks or log barriers bolted to concrete standards. All roads and spurs within the campgrounds are gravel.

A USFS crew cleans and maintains the campgrounds. Garbage and ashes are picked up at each site and removed from the campground to a site where a contractor removes them on a regular basis. Toilet pumping is accomplished via contract on an as-needed basis, generally every two years.

SPECIFIC DEVELOPED AREAS

Mogote Campground

Mogote campground consists of 41 units. Twenty-five units were added to this facility within the last five years. Occupancy was 41% in July last year, the highest month. Occupancy rates have increased each year since the expansion. The new units were constructed above the river and occupancy has been much lower than the older sites located on the river. The variable pricing taking effect this year will have the newer upper sites priced at \$4 per night, with the lower units going for \$8 per night. Also, several of the river-side sites are being added to the Mistix reservation system this year.

Mogote is the only campground within the drainage not scheduled for rehabilitation in 1994-5 due to the recent expansion. Accessibility needs to be addressed at this campground. A Capital Investment Program (CIP) proposal should be submitted soon to retrofit the toilets to accessible SST structures. Four vault toilets will need to be retrofitted within the campground. Included in the CIP proposal should be lengthening and widening spurs on the original units of the campground and replacing tables and grills as needed.

This campground is equipped with a pressurized water system which adequately serves the users. Hydrants are located throughout the campground and need to be made accessible, both with accessible trails and operation of the hydrants.

A history of minor law enforcement problems have plagued the campground. The area of the campground was the local teen-age and weekend party location before a campground was built on the site. The participants have been reluctant to give up the site. Proximity of the campground as the closest public area to the nearest town is a major reason for this history. Management actions to remedy the situation have helped to alleviate some of the problems. With each successive year, the occurrence of problems diminishes. These management actions have included re-designing the entrance of the campground to separate access from a day-use fisherman parking area and a group area. The new design allows only one access to the campground, which formerly consisted of two access points. The new access point is readily visible from the campground host site.

Mogote Group Areas

Mogote Group Areas consist of two sites, Juniper and Pinyon. Juniper has a listed capacity of 100 persons and Pinyon 50. The two areas are adjacent and share a single toilet structure. Both sites are within the Mogote Campground complex. Juniper rents for \$60 per night and Pinyon \$50 per night.

Upgrading and improving the group areas is needed. A CIP proposal has already been submitted to improve both areas. The proposal calls for each area to have its own accessible toilet structure, improved fire grills, and larger and more picnic tables. Recreation activity facilities consisting of horse-shoe pits and volleyball courts are also included in the proposal.

Aspen Glade Campground

Aspen Glade consists of 34 units, 11 of which are on the river. Occupancy peaked at 68% last year in July, with the 11 units near the river occupied well over 95%. Three separate loops make up the campground, with two above the river. Variable pricing this year will have the upper loops at \$4 and \$6, with the lower loop at \$8. Several units in the lower loop will be reservable under Mistix for the first time this year. Suggestions from several campers in Aspen Glade campground prompted the addition of "choice" sites to the Mistix system.

The water system at Aspen Glade is pressurized. The four toilet structures were chemical flush toilets until 1990, when they were replaced due to safety considerations with vault toilets. The safety concern was not only visitor safety, but also employee safety when working on the systems. Minor retrofitting will be included in the 1994 rehabilitation to meet current accessibility standards. Widening and lengthening spurs, new tables, and fire rings are all part of the rehabilitation. Work on the water system needs to be done also, as the water has been rust-colored the last few years and many campers are reluctant to drink it, even though it passes the health inspections. Accessible trails to fishing on the Conejos River should also be planned as part of the rehabilitation. Gravel road and spur surfaces will remain.

Elk Creek Campground

Elk Creek consists of 45 units, 14 of which are considered an over-flow and rarely occupied. Occupancy rates of 89% in July do not include the over-flow. Beginning in 1992 rates will be \$4 per night in the overflow and remain \$8 in the remainder of the campground. Several of the better sites in this campground were added to the Mistix reservation system beginning in 1992.

Rehabilitation in 1994-5 will consist of widening and lengthening spurs and widening the gravel road. Both toilets will be retrofitted for accessibility. Construction will include a new well and pressurized water system.

Immediate attention needs to be directed at one site located on Elk Creek. The creek has been changing its course slightly causing the camp unit to shrink. Part of the fire grill is currently part of the stream bank. Assistance has been requested from the Forest Engineering staff to remedy the situation. The unit has been removed from public use and will remain unavailable until the site is stabilized and repaired.

Spectacle Lake Campground

This campground consists of 24 units and is scheduled for rehabilitation in 1994-5. Rehabilitation will improve roads, spurs, and accessibility. A new cattle guard at the entrance will be needed when the road is widened to two-lane. Two toilet structures will need retrofitting. A new well will be drilled and a new hand pump installed.

An active hazard tree management program on this Ranger District is most evident at Spectacle Lake campground. A monotypic old-aged Cottonwood stand provided a tranquil, shaded setting for many years. Unfortunately, as the trees reached maturity, they began falling over, creating serious safety hazards.

Following a near miss in 1989, where a tree failure narrowly missed striking an occupied campsite, forest insect and disease specialists were called in to make recommendations. The specialists suggested removal of all mature Cottonwoods as tree failures were expected to be a regular occurrence. Risk management dictated that we either permanently close the campground or remove the trees. Removal was done under contract in the late spring of 1990.

The Cottonwoods (over 1,500) were removed and seedlings were planted in 1991. Blue Spruce seedlings were planted the first year and several other native species are recommended to create a diverse stand for the future. Diverse age classes are desirable and planting should continue on an annual basis here and in other campgrounds as well.

Prior to the hazard tree removal in 1990, Spectacle Lake campground was near the top in occupancy for the District. July of last year saw a 37% occupancy figure, which was much higher than 1990. The aesthetic appearance of the campground was very dramatically altered with removal of the Cottonwoods. Very few trees remained to provide shade and aesthetics. The tree removal also resulted in ground disturbances which were especially evident the first year. Time and seeding of grasses has helped improve the ground conditions.

Conejos Campground

Rehabilitation similar to that occurring in the other campgrounds is scheduled for this 16 unit facility as well. In addition, re-vegetation of different species and age classes of trees and shrubs similar to Spectacle Lake is recommended for this campground following the removal of over 500 Cottonwood trees in 1990. Conejos has a residual stand of Blue Spruce which provide shade and visual pleasure even after the hazard tree removal. Occupancy was lower in 1990 but back up to 79% for the month of July in 1991.

Conejos has only one toilet structure, which will be retrofitted for accessibility. There are two hand pumps, one of which will need a new well drilled.

Conejos and Spectacle Lake campgrounds are located within one-half mile of each other and are close to a hiking trail which accesses the South San Juan Wilderness. The trail is located across the Conejos River and would require a bridge crossing. Construction of a bridge and trails from each campground are recommended. Anglers would also benefit from the bridge. A bridge design is available that is relatively inexpensive and portable.

Lake Fork Campground

Lake Fork campground has 19 units, and 18 will be under the Mistix reservation system beginning in 1992. The campground host site is excluded from the system.

Scheduled rehabilitation will improve roads and spurs, and new tables and grills will improve the recreation experience at this campground. The toilets (2) here were chemical flush until they were replaced with vaults in 1990. Minor retrofitting is needed to make them accessible.

Mix Lake Campground

Mix Lake is the highest elevation fee campground in the Conejos River drainage at just over 10,000 feet. There are 22 units in the campground and occupancy peaked at 53% for the month of July, 1991. This is the only campground in the drainage not situated directly on the Conejos River. It sits above and between the old mining town of Platoro and Mix Lake. Platoro Reservoir is a short distance away.

The roads and spurs were rehabilitated in 1989. The tables and grills will be upgraded with the 1994 rehabilitation. Three toilet structures will be made accessible.

CAMPGROUND FEES

Fees within many of the developed sites will be changed in 1992. Pre and Post season fees will be reduced in all campgrounds.

The goals of trying variable pricing are:

1. To use the developed site fee schedule as a marketing and management tool.
2. To broaden the multicultural character of our customer base.
3. With respect to locations and times of use, to spread visitors to lesser-used campgrounds.
4. To familiarize repeat customers with less-used campgrounds.
5. To increase our customer base.
6. To encourage hunters for whom price is a selective factor, to camp in campgrounds instead of dispersed areas thus mitigating problems with trash, sanitation, and wildfire.
7. Charge a price commensurate with the quality and kinds of facilities provided.

Rationale behind these changes are:

1. Portions of some campgrounds are used more heavily than average. To the extent that price is a selective factor for our customers, this pricing schedule should tend to spread visitor use from heavily to lightly used campgrounds
2. Heavily used campgrounds are more heavily used during mid-summer. To the extent that price is a selective factor for our customers, this pricing schedule should tend to spread use from heavy to light use periods
3. Visitors currently have no price options on the District except to visit the unpopular, non-fee areas. This pricing schedule provides options. This may in turn broaden our multicultural customer base by giving minority groups opportunities to visit our facilities they might not otherwise have.
4. Visitor patterns indicate that some campgrounds or portions of campgrounds are less desirable probably due not only to natural setting, but also also to the quality and types of facilities provided. Differential pricing will bring prices more in line with the opportunity .

DEVELOPED CAMPGROUND CHART - CONEJOS RIVER DRAINAGE

<u>SITE NAME</u>	<u>UNITS</u>	<u>PAOT</u>	<u>HOST SITE</u>	<u>**DAILY FEE**</u>	<u>WATER SYSTEM</u>	<u>FEE TUBES</u>	<u>TOILETS</u>	<u>VAULTS & CAPACITIES</u>
MOGOTE	41	205	4	\$4.00 \$8.00	PRESSURIZED	2	4	8 X 750
Units 6-16, and 24,28,30,37,and 38 are Mistix sites.								
ASPEN GLADE	34	170	16	\$4,6,8	PRESSURIZED	1	4	8 X 1,000
Units 1,2,5,7,10,24,25,26,31, and 32 are Mistix sites.						1 DONATION		
ELK CREEK	45	225	23	\$8.00 \$4 OVERFLOW	3 HAND PUMPS	1	2	4 X 1,500
Units 4,5,12,14,44, and 45 are Mistix sites.						1 DONATION		
SPECTACLE LAKE	24	120	5	\$7.00	2 HAND PUMPS	1	2	2 X 1,500
CONEJOS	16	80	16	\$7.00	2 HAND PUMPS	1	1	2 X 1,500
LAKE FORK	19	95	13	\$7.00	2 HAND PUMPS	1	2	4 X 1,000
ALL UNITS ARE UNDER MISTIX (except #13, host site)								
MIX LAKE	22	110	16	\$7.00	PRESSURIZED	1	3	6 X 700
MOGOTE GROUP	N/A	150	N/A		PRESSURIZED	N/A	1 SHARED	2 X 750

** NOTE - FEES ARE SUMMER RATES. A SEPARATE CHART CONTAINS FEE INFO (NEXT PAGE). FULL SERVICE AT ALL AREAS MEMORIAL TO LABOR DAY.

FEE SCHEDULE FOR CAMPGROUNDS IN THE CONEJOS RIVER DRAINAGE

(Figures are in dollars)

		April	May *	June	July	August	Sept *	Oct	Nov
		<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>
Mogote	Upper	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
	Lower	<u>4</u>	<u>4/8</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>8/4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
	Pinon Grp.			(separate fee schedule based on occupancy)					
	Juniper Grp.			(separate fee schedule based on occupancy)					
Aspen Glade	Upper-North	<u>4</u>	<u>4/6</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>6/4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
	Upper-South	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
	Lower	<u>4</u>	<u>4/8</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>8/4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
Elk Creek	Main	<u>4</u>	<u>4/8</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>8/4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
	Overflow	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
Spectacle Lake		<u>4</u>	<u>4/7</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>7/4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
Conejos		<u>4</u>	<u>4/7</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>7/4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
Lake Fork		<u>4</u>	<u>4/7</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>7/4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
Mix Lake		<u>4</u>	<u>4/7</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>7/4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>

* The transition to seasonally different fees occurs at the beginning of the Memorial Day weekend and at the end of the Labor Day weekend.

OTHER DEVELOPED AREAS

There are five other developed areas within the Conejos River drainage which allow overnight camping. All are trailheads and provide access to the South San Juan Wilderness. They offer non-fee camping opportunities within the Conejos River drainage on the National Forest. A Forest Order prohibiting camping in non-designated areas within the drainage has been in effect since 1980. Four of these areas are suitable for over-night camping, but improvements are needed. All of the areas adequately serve the public with respect to capacities.

Elk Creek/Duck Lake Trailhead

The Elk Creek trailhead consists of a 3 panel bulletin board, vault toilet, and parking facilities. Improvements which should be considered are replacing the toilet structure with an accessible SST, and better signing for traffic circulation.

The Duck Lake portion of the trailhead needs a bulletin board, signing, improved parking, and better trail marking to the wilderness boundary. The toilet structure at the Elk Creek trailhead adequately serves this trailhead as well. Camping is allowed throughout this area.

South Fork Trailhead

This trailhead has been rehabilitated in the last two years to improve parking and access to the wilderness. Acquisition of a private parcel which is underway is important to insure the future of this trailhead. There are two parking areas located approximately 1/4 mile apart. One parking area has improved parking designated for vehicles and horse trailers. The other parking area is located further from the main road (FDR 250) and includes one toilet structure, which needs to be replaced with an accessible SST. Camping is allowed in this area. The new toilet is the only improvement needed here.

Trail Creek Camp Area

Trail Creek camp area is an historical non-fee camp spot which receives minimal over-night use. There is no toilet facility and none is planned for this location. Travel management and resource damage concerns will require more management activities here in the future. Campers and anglers have been driving vehicles in sensitive areas causing resource damage. Travel routes within the area need to be designated to reduce these impacts.

Adams Fork Trailhead

Adams Fork trailhead is a traditional camp spot used by hunters and by anglers fishing at Platoro Reservoir. This is the closest parking area to the trailhead which is actually 1/4 mile east on FDR 245. Improved parking is needed at this location, with gravel required as the area gets muddy when wet. Minor trail work is also needed where horses have short-cut from the parking area to the trail. Signing and a bulletin board are also needed at the parking area. A toilet is not recommended at this site. A toilet exists at the boat landing for Platoro Reservoir.

Three Forks Trailhead

Three Forks is the busiest trailhead on the District. The access road and parking area are adequate. Needed improvements are informational and traffic circulation signing and replacement of the exist-

ing toilet with an accessible SST. There is no overnight camping at this trailhead and no improvements should be considered which may encourage overnight use of this facility.

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT

Vegetation management within developed areas has been a high priority on the Conejos Peak Ranger District in the last several years. A fairly intensive hazard tree management program has been implemented. Vegetation management plans should be completed for each developed site to guide future management actions.

Vegetation management in the past consisted of identifying and removing hazardous trees. A tree failure during the summer of 1989 heightened the awareness and risk of hazard tree management.

The tree failure occurred during the summer use season and narrowly missed a tent. The tree that failed had no physical characteristics which indicated that it was a candidate for failure. Forest insect and disease Specialists inspected the areas and recommended removing all Cottonwood trees due to age and the probability of more tree failures.

Three campgrounds were affected the most due to the sheer numbers of mature Cottonwoods present; Mogote (lower loop), Conejos, and Spectacle Lake. Spectacle Lake was affected the most with over 1,500 trees removed from the 24 unit campground. Approximately 90% of the vegetation in the campground was removed. Conejos campground had over 500 trees removed, but was left with over 50% of the vegetation remaining in Blue Spruce. Mogote campground had over 300 Cottonwood trees removed, but shrubs and Ponderosa Pine helped negate the visual effects of the tree removal.

Re-vegetation of the sites began in 1991, and will continue for several years to replace the Cottonwood trees. Vegetation management plans should be written for all developed sites to guide this process and to anticipate similar situations in the future and make recommendations to mitigate these problems. Replacement of existing trees through planting projects many years before they're needed will insure adequate shade and aesthetic values are preserved in those areas. Priority replacement in the three affected campgrounds should continue until a good crop of replacement trees becomes established. Following successful plantings in these three campgrounds, trees should be planted in all campgrounds to provide a diverse age and species mix. An annual planting schedule should be drafted to accomplish this goal.

Inventory of tree health has begun in developed sites. Trees over 7 inches in diameter which are within striking distance of a campsite, road, or structure are tagged. Information about the tree is documented. This process is very time consuming and expensive, and will take several years to complete. Walk-through surveys each Spring prior to opening will continue until the tagging process is complete to help insure the safety of our visitors.

WILD AND SCENIC RIVER

Approximately one-half of the river drainage covered under this plan is a proposed Wild and Scenic River. Public Law 90-542, as amended, directed the Secretary of Agriculture to study the Conejos River for possible inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System. The study, conducted by USFS and the State of Colorado concluded that the Conejos River above Platoro Reservoir is eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System as a wild river area. The study also recommended that 13.2 miles of the Conejos River downstream of the Platoro Reservoir to its

confluence with the South Fork be added to the National Wild and Scenic River System as a recreation river.

The President recommended to Congress that the wild river area be added to the National Wild and Scenic River System. This recommendation also states that a 2-mile segment below Platoro Reservoir be eliminated from further consideration. Congress has not added any segments of the Conejos River to the National Wild and Scenic River System at this time.

This plan acknowledges this proposal and strives to protect the values of the area, and will not negatively impact the Wild and Scenic River designation.

Research has shown that an official designation under the Wild and Scenic River System will have effects on visitation. "Visits to recreational rivers may stimulate a considerable amount of economic activity in local regions. There is great potential for stimulating additional economic growth in local regions by taking action to increase visits from non-residents to recreational rivers"¹².

SIGNING

Improved signing is needed throughout the drainage to inform visitors of special orders, travel management, interpretation, and general information.

Travel management signing is a high District priority. Negating resource damage caused by vehicle operation off roads is the goal. A new travel order has been drafted for the Conejos River drainage, but not put into place. A Forest-wide order was put into place in 1990, but allows off-road travel up to 200 feet to allow for parking. The order drafted for the Conejos River drainage would further restrict off-road use to within 25 feet of FDR 250 and associated spur roads within the drainage. The order also restricts camping to developed designated sites, replacing the 1980 Special Order which served this purpose.

LOGGING ACTIVITY

No timber sales are planned or expected within the area covered by this plan. However, traffic associated with logging activities will impact the roads in the area.

The Red Mountain timber sale is scheduled to be sold in late 1993, with hauling expected to begin in 1994. The sale is located near the upper part of the Conejos River drainage and traffic will come down FDR 250 from just below Platoro. As part of the timber sale contract, a pilot car will be required to precede any large trucks traveling on FDR 250.

ALTERNATIVES AND ANALYSIS

The Capital Investment Program (CIP) project being instituted in 1994-95 is the most important consideration at this time in forming the future recreational opportunities in the Conejos River drainage. The planning process will begin in 1992 with on-site visits by USFS Engineers to develop detailed site plans for each campground. Involvement by representatives from the District at this stage and all successive stages of the the planning and construction of the project is extremely important.

The gambling issue and FHWA large scale project may affect the implementation of the preferred alternative. If either of these above issues comes to fruition within the next five years, the preferred alternative may be considered a minimum alternative since both issues may increase visitation.

Preserving the aesthetic qualities of the drainage through acquisition of private inholdings and expanding capacity in campgrounds are two issues which will rise in priority if this happens.

Four alternatives were proposed and considered by the ID team:

Alternative 1

Rehabilitate campgrounds scheduled for 1994-5, with accessibility a high priority.

Add proposal for accessible trails within several campgrounds and accessible fishing piers on the Conejos River, outside but near campgrounds.

Prepare and implement a detailed sign plan to improve informational and interpretive signing, especially needed in the upper reaches of the drainage.

Prepare and submit a CIP proposal for Mogote Campground to make it accessible. All other campgrounds in the drainage are already scheduled for this work.

Recommend acquisition of choice parcels of private land within the drainage, with priority to obtaining parcels owned by the Rainbow Trout Lodge, which are currently on the market.

Coordinate with District and Forest personnel to minimize traffic impacts caused by the CIP campground rehabilitation project, FDR 250 safety improvement road project, and the Red Mountain timber sale associated traffic. All projects are currently scheduled for the same time frame.

Submit a CIP proposal to improve several trailheads in the drainage by adding accessible toilet structures and improving parking.

Prepare and submit a CIP proposal for replacing wooden rail fences around all fee campgrounds within the drainage.

Develop detailed vegetation management plans for all developed campgrounds.

Alternative 2

Rehabilitate campgrounds scheduled for 1994-5, with accessibility a high priority.

Add proposal for accessible trails within several developed campgrounds.

Prepare and implement a detailed sign plan to improve informational and interpretive signing, especially needed in the upper reaches of the drainage.

Recommend acquisition of choice parcels of private land within the drainage, with priority to obtaining parcels owned by the Rainbow Trout Lodge, which are currently on the market.

Coordinate with District and Forest personnel to minimize traffic impacts caused by the CIP campground rehabilitation project, FDR 250 safety improvement road project, and the Red Mountain timber sale associated traffic. All projects are currently scheduled for the same time frame.

Alternative 3

Rehabilitate campgrounds scheduled for 1994-5, with accessibility a high priority.

Prepare and implement a detailed sign plan to improve informational and interpretive signing, especially needed in the upper reaches of the drainage.

Coordinate with District and Forest personnel to minimize traffic impacts caused by the CIP campground rehabilitation project, FDR 250 safety improvement road project, and the Red Mountain timber sale associated traffic. All projects are currently scheduled for the same time frame.

Alternative 4

No action.

Evaluation of Alternatives

Alternative 1 would fully address proposals made by the ID team. Little environmental impacts outside of developed areas would be felt with the exception of accessible fishing pier construction and sign placement. Environmental benefits from the signing and enforcing travel management regulations will actually result with reduced off-road impacts.

Benefits in "customer care" will occur with improved accessibility, improved information exchange, and safety.

Improving recreational opportunities will result in increases in economic benefits to local economies due to increases in visitation.

Acquisition of private land will help preserve aesthetic and visual quality objectives for the Conejos River drainage.

Alternative 2 addresses only the most important proposals as prioritized by the ID team.

Benefits to "customer care" increase substantially over current levels, but not as high as alternative 1. This alternative will require less funding to implement.

Alternative 3 will improve conditions within all fee campgrounds in the drainage.

Lack of accessible trails and fishing access will lessen the recreation experience of handicapped visitors.

Environmental impacts to sensitive areas will continue without off-road restrictions.

The likelihood of purchasing parcels important to maintain visual and aesthetic integrity of the drainage will diminish without impetus from the Ranger District.

Accessible toilet facilities would not be planned at Mogote campground or any trailhead.

Environmental impacts caused by driving vehicles off-road will continue to occur in the drainage without informational and interpretive signing.

The no action alternative, alternative 4, is not being considered as the campground rehabilitation scheduled for 1994-5 will occur regardless of this plan.

Preferred Alternative and Implementation

Not surprisingly, alternative 1 was chosen by the ID team as the preferred alternative. The feasibility of implementing this alternative was considered initially while proposals were first considered, and also feasibility was an evaluation criteria in choosing an alternative.

Implementation of this alternative will require additional funding, mostly through the Capital Investment Program process. There are two forms of funding for CIP proposals, one through the Regional Office CIP process, and the other through the Forest level process. The Forest level CIP proposals must be under \$30,000 and can be implemented much quicker than Regional level proposals.

Projects will be scheduled for construction activities over several years to spread out costs and impacts to visitors. Partnerships or donations are possible funding sources and will also be pursued. Priority for projects is as listed in the alternative.

The accessible trails within campgrounds may be scheduled work for the District trail crew. A construction crew is currently employed on the District and may be able to schedule this work as part of the FY92 target.

Coordination with the Colorado Division of Wildlife and internal Fishery Biologists will be pursued for information and consultation on accessible fishing piers. Fishing piers will not be considered if they affect the Wild and Scenic River System proposal.

A detailed sign plan will be drafted for the entire plan area to include recommendations made by the ID team. Interpretive signing explaining the multiple-use concept will be utilized.

A CIP proposal will be submitted to improve Mogote campground into an accessible facility.

Acquisition of private land parcels is a high District priority and this document should help strengthen that stance and increase the likelihood of more acquisition.

Coordination of the projects identified by the ID team as occurring in the drainage at approximately the same time is important to minimize impacts to visitors. The projects include the Red Mountain timber sale, FDR 250 safety improvement, and the campground rehabilitation project.

The trailhead improvements will require preparing a proposal for consideration as CIP projects. Several SST accessible toilet structures are needed and estimated at \$15,000 each.

Exclosure fence replacements around fee campgrounds will require a CIP proposal. Lodgepole pine suitable for rails is available on an adjacent Ranger District. Hardware and posts will need to be purchased. Labor to complete the fencing may be either volunteer labor or District work crews.

Vegetation management plans will be completed for all campgrounds, with emphasis on long-term planning. The plans should help avoid situations similar to the removal of most vegetation in Spectacle Lake campground. Diversity in vegetation ages and species is the desired future condition.

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